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H.W. Lack with D.J. Mabberley, The Flora Graeca Story

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Critical Perspectives

Approches Critiques



H. Walter Lack with David J. Mabberley,
*THE FLORA GRAECA STORY – SIBTHORP, BAUER,
AND HAWKINS IN THE LEVANT,*
Oxford, New York, Tokyo: Oxford University Press, 1999.

This is a marvelous book on a marvelous subject: the important observations and collections, especially of plants, in the Levant, mostly in Greece, but also in Asia Minor, Cyprus, and adjacent regions, made by John Sibthorp and his companions during their travels in the late eighteenth century, and the subsequent posthumous monumental publication of their botanical discoveries, in the three volumes of the *Florae Graecae Prodromus* (1806), and the ten volumes of the illustrated *Flora Graeca* (1806-1840).

John Sibthorp (1758-1796) was elected, at the age of 24, the second Sherardian Professor of Botany in Oxford, succeeding his father, Humphrey Sibthorp, who was the first occupant of this endowed chair. As a young man John made his first journey to the Ottoman Empire, visiting also Greece, from July 1784 to September 1787, and a second one from April 1794 to April 1795. He was accompanied in his first journey by the Austrian botanic painter Ferdinand Bauer (1760-1826), who made several exact pictorial representations of plant species and continued this work in England between the end of the first and the beginning of the second journey. All together the paintings of 966 plant species were completed, the equivalent of today's photographic records, and were reproduced in the ten volumes of the *Flora Graeca* (each of the first nine volumes including 100 species, the last containing only 66). John Hawkins (1761-1841), another Dilettanti, geologist, botanist and naturalist, partly accompanied Sibthorp in his two journeys, and, as an executor of Sibthorp testament, took care of the publication of the results together with a second executor, Thomas Platt. The book relates the travels as well as the long and laborious work done by the editors of the books, James Edward Smith (1759-1828), first President of the Linnaean Society, who is responsible for the *Prodromus* and the first six volumes of the *Flora Graeca*, Robert Brown who published the seventh, and John Lindley who completed this task (eighth to tenth volumes). The *Prodromus* includes 2,600 species and the *Flora Graeca* coloured engravings and detailed descriptions of 966 of them. In total, as presented in Appendix 7, 355 taxonomic novelties were described (one Gymnosperm, 313 dicotyledons and 41 monocotyledons). All together it seems that about 30% of the local flora was covered.

Thus, these books, of high scientific and esthetic value, constitute, no doubt, the foundation of the study of the flora of Greece but are by no means the first such studies. Lack and Mabberley narrate in detail the first such approaches to this subject in modern times, after the works of Dioscorides, "Grecian physician and pharmacologist", who lived in the first century AD. The two illustrated codices of his work (*Codex Neapolitanus*, which was typographically reproduced recently by the editions Militos in Athens, and the *Codex Vindobonensis= Codex Constantinopolitanus*, which was the subject of study, in 1912, by Professor E. Emmanuel of Athens University) were well known, the second was consulted by Sibthorp in Vienna; actually, Sibthorp did carry with him during his trips an illustrated copy of it.

Lack and Mabberley briefly remind us that the investigations on the Greek flora in modern times started during the Venetian period in Crete. The prefects of the first botanic gardens, in Pisa (Luca Ghini) and Padua (Luigi Squalermo called Anguillara), received from Crete plants and seeds sent by physicians, apothecaries and travelling naturalists. Among them mention should be made of Pietro Antonio Michiel, who also illustrated plants in *Codice Erbario* kept in the Biblioteca Marciana in Venice, Prospero Alpino and of course Onorio Belli (1550-1603). This period has been the subject of detailed research by Italian historians of science. Endemic Cretan plants have been identified in Italian collections and in pictorial representations. However, these studies remain mostly unknown to the Greek scholars interested in the Venetian period.

A little later William Sherard (1659-1728), British Consul at Smyrna and previously a student of Tournefort, collected plants of the Levant and left a colossal sum of money for establishing in Oxford a chair of botany. John Sibthorp occupied this chair after the retirement of his father, the first to occupy the Sherardian chair. Between the Venetian physicians and Sibthorp we encounter the famous French botanist and Levant traveller «par ordre du roi», Joseph Pitton de Tournefort (1656-1708). Some other planned expeditions, more or less at the same time with that of Tournefort (those of Niebuhr, of André Michaux and of Jacques-Julien Houtou de Labillardière) have not been so important as the one of Tournefort. Indeed, Tournefort stayed a longer time in the Aegean, collected a lot, left an impressive herbarium and a two-volume narrative of his travels published posthumously. Above all he was the most eminent botanist. Sibthorp, together with his Dioscorides copy carried with him in his travels a copy of the Tournefort narrative. There is a passage in

Tournefort's book referring to his stay in Crete, which is very similar to the one found in the diaries of Sibthorp.

«Nous profitions de ces occasions pour apprendre les mots vulgaires des plantes qui les présentoient. Je regardois le cerveau de ces pauvres Grecs comme autant d'inscriptions vivantes, lesquelles servent à nous conserver les noms cités par Théophraste et par Dioscoride; quoique sujettes à diverses altérations, elles dureront sans doute plus longtemps que les marbres les plus dures, parce qu'elles se renouvellent tous les jours, au lieu que les marbres s'effacent ou se détruisent. Ainsi ces fortes d'inscriptions conserveront dans les siècles à venir les noms de plusieurs plantes connues de ces habiles Grecs, qui vivoient dans les temps les plus savants et plus heureux» and Tournefort mentions that he learned more than 500 names from the “Papas and the Caloyers” (Vol. I, pp. 87-88).

Sibthorp, in his turn, went to herborize in Mt Parnassus with a young shepherd

“My Pastoral Botanist surprised me not a little with his Nomenclature: I traced the names of Dioscorides and Theophr[astus] somewhat corrupted indeed by the pronunciation and by the long series annorum which had elapsed since the time of these Philosophers but many of them unmutilated and their virtues faithfully handed on in the oral tradition of the rural Sages of Beotia [...] my Shepherd's boy returned to his Fold, not less pleased and satisfied with some Paras that I had given him, than I was in finding in such a Rustic a repository of ancient science”. One might easily suspect that these two quotations are in a sense related. Sibthorp knew the text of Tournefort. But it should be added that during his travels he collected with assiduity the popular Greek names of plants and learned modern Greek.

In three chapters that follow the authors of *The Flora Graeca Story* present information on the early years of the three protagonists, John Sibthorp, Ferdinand Bauer and John Hawkins. Then they narrate their travels. The documentary evidence for doing this is far from complete: only fragments of Sibthorp's diaries exist, in manuscript or published; many missing now letters from and to them; Hawkins' diaries which are by far more complete; other archival material. Sibthorp was recipient of a Radcliff fellowship, which permitted him, together with his remaining financial resources to realize the “beyond sea” travel, as stipulated by the conditions of this fellowship.

The first journey of Sibthorp included the following route. Starting in the summer of 1784 from Oxford he reached Vienna travelling across Europe. In Vienna he met the Baron Joseph Franz von Jacquin, a well-known botanist, and

was given a copy of both Dioscorides codices. He continued by visiting several Italian towns and meeting amateur botanists, then reached Napoli in early March 1786. From there by sea he went to Istanbul, stopping in between at Messina, Sicily, and Hania, Crete, also at Milos, Argentiera (Kimonos), Siphnos, Antiparos, Hydra, and Egina islands. In Constantinople he stayed for nearly a year (from May 1786 to March 1787) and visited the islands in the Propontis as well as the nearby lands of the European and Asiatic coast. From Istanbul he departed for Cyprus, where he stayed for one and a half month (1 April to 14 May 1787), and then, in coming back, he briefly visited the islands of Rhodes, Leros, Patmos, Shinousa, Koufonisi, Naxos, Antikera, Sikinos, Policandro (Folegandros), Kimolos and arrived to Phaliron, reaching Athens in June 1787, where he stayed at Makris' house (that same house which later became famous after the visit in Athens of Lord Byron). From Athens he made excursions to Livadia and Mt Parnassus, visiting also Kastri (Delphi). He went to Marathon, Mt Penteli, visiting the marble quarries. Finally leaving Athens by boat he visited Halkis in Euboea, and ascended on Mt Dirfi. He realized that he should visit and botanise in mountain tops only during the summer months. The visit of Mt Dirfi, on August 3, was difficult because of weather conditions, heavy rain and cold. From Euboea, on a Poriote boat he landed at Skopelos island, then at Mt Athos, where besides the port of Dafni and the village of Karyés he visited some Monasteries. To his surprise he found a codex of Dioscorides (probably the Ω 75) at the Monastery of Megisti Lavra. He also ascended on Mt Athos in the same month, then he came to Thessaloniki and visited Mt Hortiatis. In the same month he left Salonica by boat and arrived to Piraeus. Then, he proceeded to the Corinth Isthmus. Crossing it by land he took another boat for Patras, but in the meanwhile he visited Antikyra, again Mt Parnassus and Mt Erimanthos. In Patras he collected rootstocks of black Corinth seedless grapes and finally departed for England where he was back in December 1787.

During the entire trip he was accompanied by Ferdinand Bauer, whom he payed to botanise and especially to draw the plant species collected and make also some drawings of the landscapes. Bauer, an accomplished botanic painter, made on the spot several detailed drawings and marked on them numbers indicating the colours to be affected (referring to a colour chart with a hundred and forty different colour shades). The tempo of the voyage was so quick that Bauer was not able to complete his painter's task during it. In England, from these drawings and from the plants grown from seeds they transported, Bauer completed, between the first and the second journey of Sibthorp, nearly a

thousand of complete colour illustrations of plants, all of superb quality, which were later reproduced in the *Flora Graeca*. Animals, collected during the journey and preserved, were also the subjects of Bauer's illustrations, fishes, reptiles, birds and mammals. Sibthorp, who treated Bauer like a servant, did not continue to use his services in his second journey. Another person accompanying Sibthorp in a part of his trip (he had met him at Istanbul) was John Hawkins, a mineralogist, geologist and geographer, also interested in botany, who collected also material for him. Hawkins was one of those Levant Lunatics, member of the Dilettanti, who became at a young age (30), as Sibthorp (at the age of 31), fellow of the Royal Society. Both were gentlemen with considerable financial revenues, although Hawkins was richer than Sibthorp. Both had used the services of Ferdinand Bauer. After the first journey they became close friends. A third companion was Captain Ninian Imrie, a gentleman interested in geology and to a lesser degree in topography. He accompanied Sibthorp from Istanbul to Cyprus, Athens, Mt Parnassus, Thessaloniki and Patras. Between the two journeys Sibthorp completed his notes regarding an introductory text to the Flora, the *Prodromus*.

After his first journey the health of Sibthorp deteriorated. This was the reason of the delay of his second departure to the great annoyance of Hawkins, with whom Sibthorp planned to make jointly the second journey. Thus, Hawkins departed earlier, he left London in August 1793 and arrived at Zakynthos in April 1794. In Zakynthos he met several friends made from his first visit, the British consul Spiridon Foresti and many other personalities from the local nobility. Foresti later on became instrumental in keeping and sending collected material to Sibthorp. From Zakynthos Hawkins reached Istanbul in April 1794, where he stayed and made several trips. In Istanbul Sibthorp joined Hawkins travelling from England inland through continental Europe. The two friends departed beginning September 1794 by boat, landed in the islands of Imvros, Limnos and then Mt Athos where they visited several Monasteries and Sibthorp collected the popular names of vertebrates, mollusca and crabs. These names were published later on by Walpole. Then they visited the islands Skopelos, Skiathos, the town of Halkis in Euboea island (Egripos or Negreponte), in the same island Vlic[h]ada near Edipos, and finally arrived in Athens. In this city they stayed a little, visited the Academy of Plato [Acathymia], the Tourkovounia, Daphni, and further West, Eleusis. Back to Athens they went to Thebes, the lake Topoglias (Copais), Livadia and Asprospitia. The two "beyzadehs" (as the Turks called them, a kind of young Lords) reached Patras and then Zakynthos, where they stayed for a while. Sibthorp was not solely interested in botany and zoology but

also in agriculture, in customs and costumes. He recorded them and learned a certain amount of Greek to communicate with the locals. From Zakynthos on 22 February, 1795 they started a tour of the Morea (Peloponnese).

They reached the West coast of the Peloponnese, visited Pyrgos, went near Olympia, which at that time was not excavated, passed through the village of Lala and finally ended at Tripolizza. The scenery of this part of the Peloponnese was depressing, they looked in vain for the beauty of Arcadian shepherdesses and/or the sounds from the pipe of the sylvan swain. They found only vermin and filth. In short there was nothing Arcadian in Arcadia. In middle March they reached Argos, visited Mycenae, continued to Nafplion (Napoli di Romania), Hermione, Corinth, Vostitsa and Patras. Then they went again to Pyrgos and from there they descended through Zaharo, Kiparissia to Kalamata. From there they visited Mani, stayed in Kardamili, ascended Mt Taygetos, went to Sparti and returned to Mani going until Tainaron. They reached Messenia, Mt Ithomi (with the Convent of Vulkano), ancient Messeni and Mavromati. It is interesting to notice the information that people in Messenia were eating truffles (Sibthorp was presented a basket of them). The same is said after thirty years independently by Bory de Saint Vincent in his *Narration*. After visiting Koroni the party came back to Zakynthos on 29 April.

Sibthorp was in a bad health condition but insisted on leaving for England navigating through the Adriatic to avoid the Napoleonic French who were at war with England. The boat stopped in Cephallonia, Ithaca, Lefkada (Santa Maura) and Madouri island. Then it reached Corfu and bad weather obliged them to stay for some time at Othoni island. Crossing Germany Sibthorp returned to Oxford on 8 October, 1795. But he was in very poor health. Apparently he contracted malaria and subsequently suffered several pulmonary infections, perhaps tuberculosis. He died a few months after his return, in Bath on 8 February, 1796. In his will he left his fortune to Oxford University, but only after the completion of the edition of his botanical works regarding the flora of Greece for which the revenues of his estate should be used in temporal priority. The executors of his testament were Thomas Platt and Hawkins, his dear friend and companion in his journeys.

The edition of these works was not an easy task. For the *Prodromus* Sibthorp left only notes for the completion of a text. He did not annotate the Bauer illustrations and did not mention the localities of plant collections except eventually in his diaries, but these were also fragmentary and incomplete. A

skilled botanist should be designated as editor, or eventually as a partial author of this work. Hawkins and Platt selected James Edward Smith (1759-1828), a botanist and President of the Linnaean Society. Smith convinced his father to support him financially in order to buy in 1784 the Linnaean Cabinet, that is the collection of books, archives and herbarium left by Carolus Linnaeus and put to auction. Then, in 1788, Smith founded the Linnaean Society, to which belonged the Cabinet as well as other plant collections and became its permanent President. By acquiring of the Linnaean material England became the foremost nation in botanical studies. Smith was commissioned to edit Sibthorp's material, write the *Prodromus* and the text to accompany the colour plates of the *Flora Graeca*. He was actually an employee on a monthly pay. The task proved to be more difficult than originally thought. Smith cross referenced the plates, the species mentioned in the *Prodromus*, and added, when possible, information regarding the localities of collections from the diaries. He took into consideration new information that had already been published as well as the Tournefort material. But the text, according to the wishes expressed in the testament, included only the species collected by Sibthorp and his collaborators. The *Prodromus* started being published from 1806 (the first part of the first volume) and was completed in 1809 (when the last volume was edited). The *Flora Graeca* started being published also in 1806, and under Smith's supervision the sixth volume was completed in 1827. In the frontispiece Sibthorp's contribution is indicated as that of the collector, the one contributing the illustrations and leaving notes, while Smith appears the one that provided the descriptions and the synonyms from the literature. The difficulty with the publication of the illustrations was that every printed plate, an engraved of a painting by Bauer, should be coloured by hand. This meant that for 30 copies of the *Flora Graeca* planned to appear, and for 966 species illustrations, some 28,980 plates should be coloured by hand, an enormous labour. For this work James Sowerby (1757-1822) and members of his family were selected. It seems that only 25 copies of the *Flora Graeca* appeared first, in 1808, but 500 copies of the *Prodromus*. Later on 40 more copies of the *Flora Graeca* were published. The delay in publication was due to financial difficulties. After the death of Smith, in 1828, one more volume, the seventh, of the *Flora* appeared under the supervision of Robert Brown. The three remaining volumes were edited by John Lindley. The entire publication was completed in 1840, 45 years after the death of their author, John Sibthorp. The *Flora Graeca* is an extremely rare and magnificent book. From the first printing (about 25 copies) about 10 are in English public libraries (one at the British Library –previously at the British Museum–, another in Oxford at the Bodleian

Library, a third in Cambridge, another in Kew at the Royal Botanical Garden). There is also a copy in the Linnean Society and another at the Horticultural Society in London. The famous Imperial copy of Franzis now at the Austrian National Library in Vienna and Baron Delessert's copy is now in Paris at the Institut de France. There is a copy at the National Library of Greece in Athens probably of the first edition although no examination of the watermarks was made in order to determine whether it is of the first or the second impression (the 40 copies of the impression 1845 or 1847). The Padua Botanic Garden's copy is of the second edition. There are copies in private libraries and others in American libraries. The Laboratory of Botany at the University of Patras owns a microfiche edition by IDC from Leiden.

Few Greek botanists are mentioned in the book we describe here. First among them is the Zakynthian apothecary who collected plants of the island and sent them to Sibthorp together with their local names; he remains anonymous. The second is Dimitri Argyrami, "an aged Greek botanist [...], who had known the Danish traveller Forskall [Forsskal], and who possessed of some works of Linnaeus", met by Sibthorp in Istanbul in 1794. At the Epilogue mention is made of Michael Trivoli Pieri and his flora of Corfu [*Flora Corciensis*, Corfu, 1824]. Actually Pieri has published several Centuria of plant species of Corfu, the first 300 plants in 1814, an additional 200 in 1824. It is said that he had collected around 1,000 species in total. He had studied in Padova and became a member of the French Ionic Academy. Although Lack and Mabberley give 1834 as his death date, other information indicates his birth and death chronology as 1783-1829. Another interesting piece of information is that Hawkins was the first who observed on Mt Ochi in Euboea, the Dragon House (Δρακόσπιτο), actually a megalithic construction, probably an ancient temple.

Let me add some few corrections and identifications in order to complete the survey of this important and interesting book. On page 15, the work of Belon should be dated 1553, not 1533 as printed. On page 132, "Vostese[?]" is Vostitsa [Αφγιο], "Exceede, in Albany[?]" is Galaxidi [Γαλαξείδι], "Excelocaster in the Morea [?]" is Xylokastro. On page 133, "Port Exce Mile[?]" is Examilia [Εξαμίλια, to the East of the Corinth Isthmus], "Dardinollo [Canakkale Bogazi]" is Δαρδανέλια, "Tenodos [Bozcaada]" is Τένεδος. On page 152, "Alexander Morosi" is Αλέξανδρος Μουρούζης. Also, "Giovanni di Stama Zanachi" (page 74) "a rich Greek merchant in Levadia", and "Segr. Janachi" (page 162) "in Levadia, possibly an English resident", is the same person, probably named Ιωάννης Σταματογιαννάκης.

In spite of these few corrections and the fact that in printing of Greek names in Greek characters the final ς is often transcribed as ζ , this book is a production of a high esthetic and literary quality, the text is the result of an extensive and exhaustive research of all possible sources. It is a book of obvious interest for those fond of the history of systematic botany and of the description of Greece, a country with a high biodiversity in comparison to other European countries, of obvious interest for those interested in the early travellers in the Balkans and the Middle East, for those interested in the history of Greece and finally for those who collect popular Greek names of plants and animals. Several sources of such names are indicated, in archives or in printed form. The only drawback of this book is its exceedingly high purchase price.

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